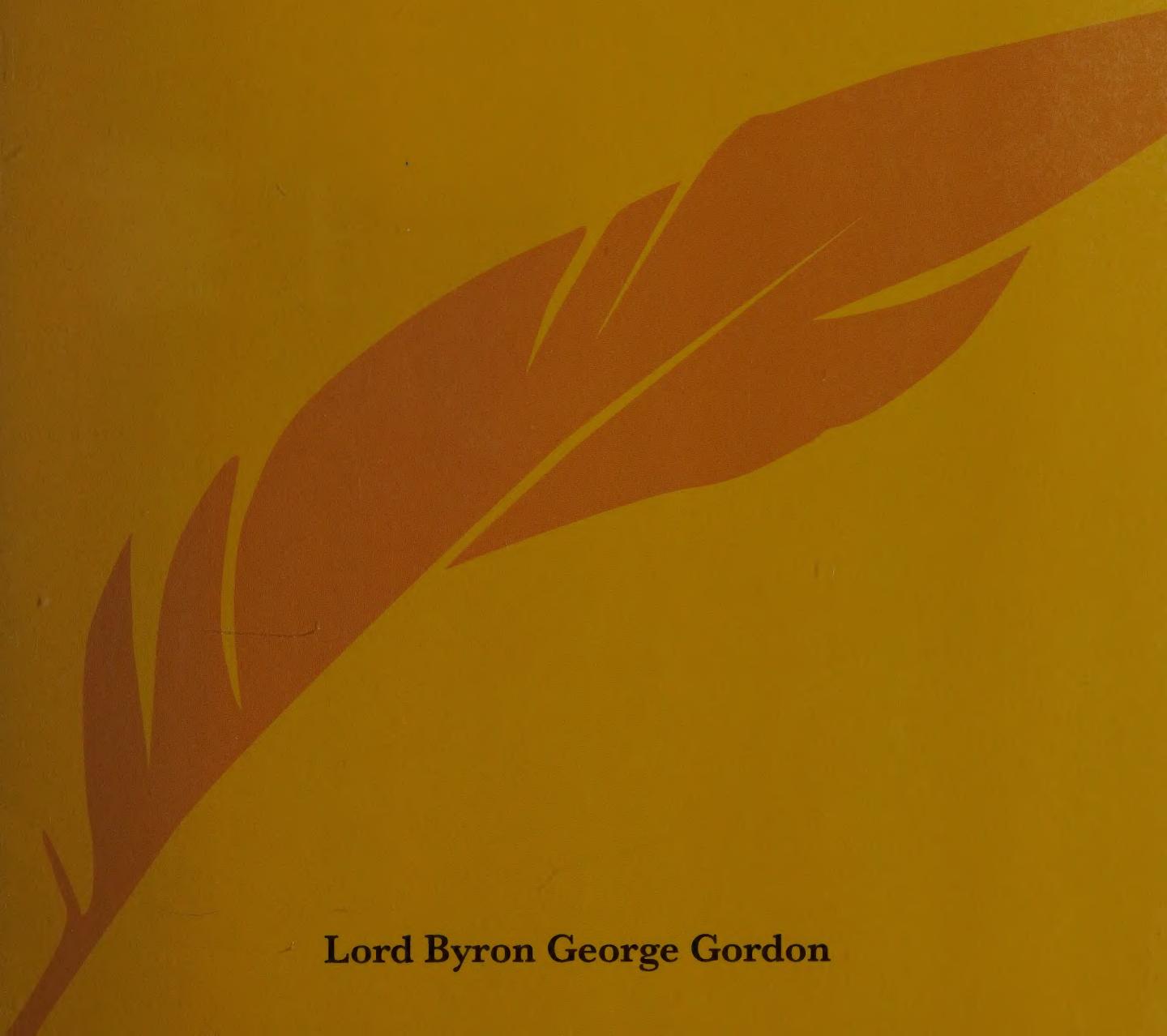


Chronological Sequence In The Maya Ruins Of Central America (1904)



Lord Byron George Gordon

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CHRONOLOGICAL SEQUENCE IN THE MAYA RUINS OF CEN- TRAL AMERICA.

BY

GEO. BYRON GORDON.

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CHRONOLOGICAL SEQUENCE IN THE MAYA RUINS OF CENTRAL AMERICA.

ON the North American Continent, before the coming of the Europeans, two great aboriginal peoples had developed their respective cultures far in advance of all the others, and left behind them, when they passed away, enduring monuments to bear witness to their achievement. One of these peoples is called the Aztec and the other the Maya. The centre of Aztec influence was the Mexican plateau, from which it spread out to the Gulf of Mexico and to the Pacific; to the river Panuco on the north and to the Gulf of Tehuantepec on the south; and to-day the Nahuatl language, to which stock the language of the old Aztecs belonged, is heard over this wide area. The seats of the Mayas were in Central America, and to-day the Maya tongue is heard from the Alpine heights of Guatemala to the fertile valleys of Honduras, from the forest wilderness of Chiapas and Peten to the broad, unwatered plains of Yucatan; and again away northward, on the western shores of the Gulf, the harsh Maya gutturals are heard in contrast to the soft Nahuatl accents of the neighbouring tribes. The name Maya is applied generically to a great many dialects descended from the parent tongue, which must have been spoken at a remote period by the ancestors of the present tribes, but the date and origin of that ancestry are shrouded in obscurity. At some period of its history, however, several branches of this ancestral stem were established in the Central American region. Their ruined cities are found from Honduras to Chiapas, and are especially numerous along the course of the Usumacinta River and on the peninsula of Yucatan. Roughly speaking, the seat of the ancient Maya culture may be said to correspond to the Central American region, including Yucatan and Chiapas.

In the absence of historical records referring to the origin of the Mayas and the development of their culture, taken in connection with the paucity of traditional accounts, our only reliable source of exact information lies in the archaeological evidence that has survived the passage of time and has only recently begun to receive its proportionate share of attention from the scientific world. In order to realize the possibilities of this field of investigation, it is only necessary to observe what has been accomplished by the explorations that have been undertaken during the last twenty years. Although the individuals

and institutions engaged in these explorations have been few and their resources small, they have been instrumental in bringing about a very considerable change in the condition of our knowledge of the ancient Mayas,¹ and an equally significant change in the general attitude toward the ancient civilization of Central America, for the indifference of a few years ago has been gradually replaced by an interest more in keeping with the character of the subject.

The most striking feature of all the old Maya cities is that presented by the temples, rising with elaborate details of architecture and of ornament, upon broad pyramidal foundations,—a characteristic type that distinguishes the old Maya architect from all his brethren in ancient America, and that finds its nearest parallel in the pyramidal structures of the Aztecs. In these elevated sanctuaries are often found carved tablets containing hieroglyphic inscriptions in a style and character which form another distinguishing property of Maya culture and give to the Maya scribe a distinct superiority among his ancient American brethren. Another remarkable feature found in many of the Maya cities consists of the sculptured columns or stelæ that have excited so much curiosity among travelers and explorers. These monuments are almost always rectangular in cross section, and vary in height from five or six to thirty feet. Sometimes the four vertical sides are covered with hieroglyphics from top to bottom, but the typical form has for its principal feature a human figure carved in high relief on one side, the other sides being occupied by the inscription.

In addition to these imposing monumental remains, the many objects that have been brought to light by the recent explorations, representing every form of human activity except the working of metals and the arts to which that process paved the way in the modern world, possess an interest that appeals strongly to the imagination and enable us in some degree to realize the actual experiences of the ancient Maya people. Their domestic pursuits and public life could in a measure be reproduced from their implements, utensils and personal ornaments, their ruined dwellings, and their public places. Even their social institutions and religious conceptions are dimly reflected in the plans of the cities and the arrangement of their several parts, in the scenes portrayed upon the sculptured monuments and on the painted surfaces, as well as in the contents of the tombs and the manner of disposing of the dead. The collections of relics from the Central American ruins now safely guarded in the museums of America and of Europe are sufficiently representative to furnish the public with a tolerably true estimate of the intellectual rank of the ancient Mayas and the condition of their civilization. It is from these collections that

¹ The results of Maudslay's explorations are given in the "Biologia Centrali Americana, Archaeology," and those of the Peabody Museum explorations are to be found in the "Memoirs of the Peabody Museum," vols. i and ii. Dr. Holmes' studies are contained in the "Anthropological Series of the Field Columbian Museum," vol. i, Nos. 1 and 2.

the public must be content for the present to draw their conclusions also respecting the origin and history of these strange peoples.

To the archaeologist, however, concerned as he is in the interpretation of such phenomena as his excavations bring to light, the item of supreme interest is that of the hieroglyphic inscriptions, and it is characteristic of all human endeavor that this interest gains rather than loses from the fact that these inscriptions contain so much that is still unintelligible. Notwithstanding the progress that has recently been made in our knowledge of the Maya hieroglyphics, the inscriptions are still, in part, all but a sealed book, affording just enough insight into the contents to whet, but not to satisfy the appetite. The most gratifying gain that has been made in this connection is the reconstruction of the calendar system in use among the Mayas and its application to the monumental records. When we consider that this discovery has been the work of very recent years, recalling how hopeless the task seemed at the beginning, there is reason to hope that the remaining problems are not incapable of solution. The efforts of the present generations should be directed first of all to the work of rescuing any possible clue before it becomes too late and of preserving the inscriptions that still remain. In this respect Central America offers a vast and fascinating field for exploration.

Although no one has yet been able to read in the Maya inscriptions such texts as may relate to the doings of rulers or the fortunes of the people or anything that could properly be called history, yet the simple record of dates has furnished something resembling a rough historical outline like the first blocking out of the marble before the features of the statue begin to take form. In order to make this clear it should be understood that most of the inscriptions begin each with a date, and it is generally agreed that such a date refers to the erection of the monument or building on which it is found. If we could find the means of connecting these dates with our own chronology we could readily determine the actual age of any given monument; but even if this is not possible, we can at least ascertain the relative age of such monuments by comparing the dates with one another, and thus establish a definite though fragmentary chronological sequence for the ancient Maya Empire, and every new inscription containing a date will add to the completeness of this record. In its present state this chronological sequence does not take us back to the beginnings of Maya history or even afford us a glimpse of its earlier pages. One reason for this state of affairs is to be found in the fact that the Mayas had absolutely no reverence for antiquity. They did not respect a building or a monument merely because it was old. The older a monument became the less the estimation in which it was held, and when therefore a monument lost its interest because of its being a sort of a back number it became an encumbrance and was often deliberately destroyed. Evidence to this effect is by no means rare. The natural consequence of this attitude would be that any given

generation might be willing to tolerate the works of their fathers or grandfathers, or even works of greater antiquity, provided they were not too much in the way, but works of great antiquity would have only a slight chance for preservation. This may explain why it is that the monuments known to-day represent a range of only a few hundred years if we omit several dates which are considered traditional and therefore not properly belonging to the chronological sequence, and several others in which the actual reading is open to question.

The earliest unquestioned date is one found at Copan, on the western frontier of Honduras. Next we find, away northward on the borders of Mexico and in the Usumacinta valley, dates belonging to a somewhat later period. Still farther northward, on the peninsula of Yucatan, the only known date belongs to a later period still. Thus whatever may have been their origin and whatever the direction of their wanderings during the days of their barbarism or before their arrival at their final home, it appears that the Mayas during their later migrations, when they lived in cities and raised inscribed monuments, moved from the south toward the north. This movement, measured from the earliest known date at Copan to the date at Chichen Itza, in Yucatan, covered a period of scarcely more than three centuries. It is not to be supposed that the movement was in the nature of an exodus and that the founding of a new settlement or the building of a new city was accompanied by the abandonment of the earlier establishments. On the contrary, the older cities continued to flourish while the movement was going on. Such at all events are the deductions arising from a comparison of dates. How do these conclusions agree with the cognate evidence?

First we have the evidence of decorative design. One of the most conspicuous characteristics of the Mayas was their artistic instinct, which expressed itself in a profusion of ornament in everything they produced. The walls of their temples are covered with ornament, and their monuments of whatever class are executed in a highly decorative style. At Copan we find a condition in which certain favorite themes are treated in a manner distinctly conventional, but never approaching a geometrical character. In Yucatan the same themes are still the most affected, but here they are much more influenced by conventionalism and the style of ornament is largely geometrical. The transition is not difficult to trace, and the order of development is the natural one.

Again, the buildings in Yucatan are in many instances fairly well preserved, some of them having chambers still entire, while those farther south are much less perfect, and at Copan especially the ruin is very complete. We must be careful, however, how we admit this condition as evidence of the greater antiquity of the Southern cities. The climate of Yucatan is much drier than that of Guatemala and Honduras, and here also the heavy forests that the more southerly cities have been bearing for centuries are wanting;

hence the conditions in Yucatan are more favorable for the preservation of architectural remains.

Perhaps the strongest evidence of the greater antiquity of Copan is to be found in the conditions underlying the foundations of the ruined buildings that occupy the surface. Where the river during its encroachments has torn away these foundations it has exposed to view the remains of older buildings to a depth of more than a hundred feet, and at several different levels what appear to be buried pavements are distinctly visible. In order to understand this situation it should be borne in mind that the principal buildings at Copan stand upon an elevation like a hill, with terraced slopes which distinguish its contour from that which would be presented by a natural eminence. This elevation has been assailed on its eastern side by the river with the result that I have described. The excavations made by Maudslay and by the expeditions from the Peabody Museum were confined almost entirely to the upper level, but wherever these excavations were carried below the foundations of the buildings which now occupy the surface, the same conditions were encountered, namely the remnants of walls and pavements forming a lower stratum and belonging necessarily to older structures, which must have belonged to an earlier period of occupation or at least of construction. This condition is perfectly general at Copan, and the indications point to the existence of several distinct strata corresponding to different periods of culture, and if this should prove to be the case, it is not unlikely that somewhere in the lower levels may be found the earlier forms from which the hieroglyphic symbols themselves developed. Herein lies our best hope for a key to the inscriptions.

Copan marks the southern extension of Maya dominion and, since the general movement was toward the north, the founders of Copan, it would be natural to suppose, must have come from parts still farther south, unless they came by sea from east or west. There is nothing in the countries to the south to indicate that the original home of Maya culture lay in that direction, and it cannot be said that a more satisfactory case can be made out for lands beyond the sea. It would seem therefore that the Maya culture must have been developed on the soil where its remains are found even if the germs were carried by the people from parts unknown; and in order to find the beginnings of that culture and the intermediate stages of development, we must seek them on the very sites where the higher condition was attained, and among the deposits that lie deeper than any excavations heretofore made.

It may be safely predicted that Maya dates will be found both earlier and later than any now known, and it is at Copan itself, where the earliest known date is found, and where conditions point to the first settlement of the Mayas in Central America, that the earliest records are most likely to come to light. The great need at present in connection with the study of Maya archaeology and the interpretation of the inscriptions is for more material, and till this

has been increased, further progress can hardly be made. Every new inscription unearthed will add to the completeness of the record and bring us one step nearer to a definite knowledge of Maya affairs. A whole history waits to be unfolded, a history that promises to be of exceptional interest to the modern world and of deep significance in its relation to the general uses of historical science.

G. B. GORDON.

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